



Mesma Belsaré. (Photo: Gajen Sunthara, DEF)

# A Conversation with Maya Kulkarni and Mesma Belsaré

Karen Greenspan

Mesma Belsaré: I came to know about Maya [Kulkarni] through the dance community in New York. Some colleagues had mentioned her name to me. I was looking for a dance mentor, an artistic mentor, a sounding board. I wasn't able to find anybody for about six or seven years. Then someone mentioned Maya to me. I had not heard of her, but something about her description intrigued me. I took the number and I called her. She was extremely generous. She invited me over and had me dance for her. Ever since then we have been working together.

BR: Had you just moved to Boston?

Belsaré: No, I had been in Boston for almost six years. I was a student at Massachusetts College of Art and was working at an art museum as a museum educator. But my first love is and was dance. All my time was spent dancing – thinking about it, doing it. However, I was doing it all by myself. I did not have anyone to look at what I was doing and guide me.

BR: And you are also a visual artist?

Belsaré: Yes. I'm a painter. In fact, Maya has a collection of my work.

BR: Maya, what are Mesma's qualities as a dancer that you wanted to highlight, explore, and challenge?

Maya Kulkarni: When Mesma came to me, she had already had professional training with other gurus in India. She had been performing a lot and was looking for someone to groom her. When I met her she was kind of agonized inside. Mesma was very sincere and passion-

ate about trying to find something, and very hardworking. All those qualities were wonderful, and visually she had such beautiful lines. She is able to use her body beautifully. So I was very attracted to her commitment to her art.

She was looking for a way to go beyond where she was at that point. She needed somebody to talk to, with whom to think things through, to talk about dance, and to talk about the direction in which she could go. I felt I could contribute to that. So, that is how it began.

Initially we worked on abhinaya. And over a long period of time, I began to see the inner Mesma. She flowered. She was able to translate the ideas I had very quickly. There is a great deal of synergy between the two of us. And we became good friends as well.

BR: How long have you been working together?

Belsaré: Almost eight years now.

Kulkarni: I must tell you that in working with Mesma I have also evolved as a choreographer. My choreographic vision was latent, dormant within. And it flowered because she enabled me to do that. She was the right kind

of person. The more I gave her, the more she wanted. There was this give-and-take that was very fruitful, very productive.

Belsaré: By the way, when the two of us are together, we are not just talking about dance. We talk about everything that interests us—from painting to sculpture to literature. And she is a scholar in her field of political science and political philosophy. She has opened up many horizons for me. She has enabled me to think beyond just dance. She has taught me the value of really looking at life closely and to live it joyfully. She keeps telling me, "You must live life in a way that the beauty and joy move through you



Photo: Courtesy of Maya Kulkarni

Maya Kulkarni

into the dance.” And that is a wonderful gift.

BR: So you both have really nurtured each other.

Belsaré and Kulkarni: Yes, that is the right way to put it.

BR: How did the piece *Shilpa Natana* come about?

Kulkarni: When I composed works for myself to dance, I stayed strictly within the traditional genre. With Mesma, I was stepping out – stepping out of the traditional *margam* structure [of bharatanatyam]. That is what we did with *Shilpa Natana*. I wanted to bring the temple sculptures to life.

Every movement in this comes from the *Natyashastra* and the *Abhinayadarpana* [ancient Sanskrit treatises on the performing arts]. We explored the different prescribed positions of the feet. Any Indian classical dance will contain these structural elements. However, we isolated them and strung them together in a cohesive presentation.

Belsaré: In this piece, the visual and kinetic arts come together, with an emphasis on the sculptural aspect. Maya came up with this concept during one of our walks along the Hudson River. We subsequently gave it the Sanskrit name *Shilpa Natana* (The Dancing Sculptures).

BR: Tell me about *In Each Is Both*.

Kulkarni: I had wanted to choreograph the *Hymn of Creation* (*Nasadiya Sukta*) from the *Rig Veda* for a long time, but it’s a very abstract, philosophical concept. The hymn does not talk of the image of Shiva. But all of creation is encompassed in him as an underlying creative force. Shiva consists of everything. When Shiva’s male and female energies separate, the two halves long to unite again, and so “desire” is born. This desire is the source of creation.

BR: Did you choreograph the piece specifically for the theme of the program “Dualities of Dance: Addressing Gender in Indian Classical Dance”?

Kulkarni: No. We created it two years ago, not specifically for this theme.

Belsaré: Shiva’s form of Ardhanārīshwara

is not a physical concept. It’s not about gender or androgyny. Also, Maya’s way of visualizing narrative is different than other choreographers. While working on this concept, we came to a point where we discovered a compelling connection between the meaning of the sculptural image of Ardhanārīshwara and the abstract ideas in the *Hymn*.

Kulkarni: We assembled images around this theme to break open the concept. For example, normally, when a dancer tells how Shiva proceeds to his wedding with Uma, she would simply show the mudra of Shiva sitting on the bull and indicate that he is passing by. Instead, we danced the whole scene. We elaborated a detailed tableau of the entire event – Shiva’s vehicle and his companions, the playing of the drums by Vishnu and cymbals by Brahma, the ecstatic accompaniment of the trumpeters and drummers, and so on – like the painted detail in a temple mural or sculptural frieze. Other dancers in the audience came up to us afterwards and told us they understood every single facet – the *sanchari* (thoughts). It was in tradition, and yet not traditional.

Belsaré: Maya’s choreographic style and vision are so crystal clear; there is no room for ambiguity. Her clarity is what evokes such poetic images. Her imagination knows no bounds. Although her images are rich and plentiful, she pushes me to economize movement. So we say a whole lot but only dance the essential.

Kulkarni: Mesma is a different kind of dancer. This vision could not be articulated by anyone else.

Belsaré: It is Maya’s faith in me that allows me to do what I can do.

Kulkarni: We are now working on something completely different. *The Allegory of the Cave* by Plato.

Belsaré: Maya is beginning to flesh out the ideas. She is visualizing the potential for a dramatic dance. The impact of a strong narrative is always exciting to us.

Kulkarni: We like to be in conversation. Through conversation, new works emerge.